

This Easter, a Group of Muslims in Australia Will Attend Mass — as They Have for the Past 13 Years

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This Sunday, Catholic churches across Sydney, Australia will bear the usual signs of Easter: incense, fresh flowers, a lit Paschal candle — and a few rows of churchgoers wearing kufi and headscarves. Every year for the past 13 years, groups of Muslims have attended Easter Mass in the Sydney Archdiocese and Broken Bay Diocese.

It all started around 2001 when a group of Gülen Muslims who had immigrated to Sydney from Turkey sought to dismantle animosity in their new home. For the group, who practices love of the creation, sympathy for the fellow human, compassion, and altruism, one way of coping was to actively foster understanding among Christian faith groups. So, they called the Catholic Dialogue and Interfaith Office of Sydney and explained that people were pulling veils off of Muslim women, spitting at them, and attacking them. The Director of the Office, Sister Trish Madigan, O.P., sprung into action. A Dominican Sister of Eastern Australia and Solomon Islands, Sister Trish holds a master's in Ecumenical Interfaith Studies with a focus on Islam from Trinity College and a doctorate in Arabic and Islamic studies from the University of Sydney.

“I really felt very disturbed that they were suffering so much,” Sister Trish recalled. “But the Muslim community’s initiative and desire to work together gave us a dialogue pattern.” Along with the Marist Sisters and Columban Brothers, Sister Trish worked with the Muslim-Australian community on concrete action steps. She held educational sessions for Catholics on the 1965 encyclical *Nostra Aetate*, which “urges all Christians and Muslims to ... work sincerely for mutual understanding.” She invited Muslims to local churches to explain their faith background and beliefs. In the era of 9/11, Muslims gracefully answered questions as simple as why Muslim women wear veils; slowly they educated a community.

But the work went beyond the Catholic Church, too. In 2002, religious leaders from across Australia banded together to form the Australian National Dialogue Council, which organized an annual Abrahamic Conference for 500 attendees of Muslim, Christian, and, later, Jewish faith. From 2004 to 2012, the group formed traveling regional dialogue sessions with government leaders from Australia and other countries like Indonesia and Cambodia. In 2011, the cohort traveled to Erbil, Iraq to do a research project on the handling of religion in secular government schools.

However, the most important show of solidarity was perhaps the simplest: The Muslim community invited members of Christian and Catholic churches to their homes for *iftar*, the sundown family meal that breaks the Ramadan fast. Sister Trish says she was thrilled to attend.



Sister Trish Madigan at 62nd UN Commission on the Status of Women

Long before she studied ecumenicism, Sister Trish had traveled as a young student through mosques in Malaysia and Buddhist temples in Thailand and Singapore. It was the 1970s, and she remembers the world as feeling less hostile and radical.

“People were very friendly,” she remembered. “They invited us into their homes and places of worship.”

Years later, Sister Trish found that same spirit of welcome in her Sydney community. Christians who had never been to a Muslim’s home were honored. For some of the Muslim families participating, it was their first time inviting a non-Muslim into their home. On a few occasions, Sister Trish was invited to pray with the family.

“We didn’t join directly in their prayer, but we prayed reflectively in the same room,” Sister Trish said. “It’s a humbling experience to share the same spirit of prayer, to share in a spiritual love of God.”

The Catholic community reciprocated by inviting Muslims to attend Mass on holidays, but they were met with trepidation. Sister Trish said she believes there was a discord in theology with Muslims attending a Catholic service; the community didn’t want it to look like they were converting on an individual basis. So, the Catholic church continued to extend the invitation year after year.

On Easter Sunday in 2005, a group of 20 Muslim men filed into the front row of Saint Mary’s Cathedral.

“When the bishop welcomed them, the whole church just clapped,” Sister Trish said. “It’s pretty extraordinary because they don’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus. But they’re not expected to be Christian, and we’re not expected to be Muslim. It’s about being respectful of each other’s faiths.”

The next year, the same group attended and brought their wives. Now, each year for the last 13 years, groups of Muslims attend Easter Masses across Sydney as a show of solidarity. Sister Trish is no longer on the Interfaith Council, but she says interfaith dialogue and support is more vital than ever. She’s committed to defending those of other faiths, especially Muslims and Jews, in her community, whether it’s facilitating local discussions or writing op-eds to her local newspapers.

And, she encourages Christians to be in solidarity with Muslims, just as the Muslim community has done every year at Easter.

“We have to continue to decide to defend each other, rather than leaving each group to defend themselves” she said. “They’re like us, and we’re like them. When we engage, we become less afraid of each other.”



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